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SUBJECT: MFA RESPONSE ON URGING PA PRESIDENT ABBAS TO SEIZE OPPORTUNITY OF GAZA DISENGAGEMENT

REF: STATE 189905

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Bruce Turner, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) We discussed reftel points encouraging the GoF to urge PA President Abbas to seize the opportunity on Gaza disengagement with Herve Besancenot, MFA DAS-equivalent for Levant/Israeli-Palestinian issues, and Christophe Guilhou, Cabinet Advisor to FM Douste-Blazy on Middle East issues, on October 17. (Note: President Abbas is in Paris October 17-18, and met with President Chirac October 17; an October 18 meeting with FM Douste-Blazy was canceled due to scheduling problems on the French side. End note.) Besancenot confirmed that the GoF had and would continue to urge Abbas to seize the opportunity offered by Gaza withdrawal and implement key reforms.

2. (C) On the question of the role of armed groups, however, Besancenot, offered a differing interpretation of the consensus reached at the September 20 Quartet ministerial. According to Besancenot, the key word in the SYG Annan's September 20 statement was "ultimately" -- i.e., the Quartet had agreed that there was an incompatibility between armed group/militia activities and democratic institutions, but the Palestinians were still in a state of political transition and did not yet have a full democracy. Accordingly, the GoF position (and that of the EU, he implied) would be to support Abbas as he sought to politically integrate Hamas, which could ultimately lead to Hamas' disarmament and renunciation of violence. In the GoF view, Hamas participation in January legislative elections would put Abbas in a better position post-elections to push Hamas toward renunciation of violence and acceptance of negotiations with Israel -- opposition to which had been Hamas' earlier basis for boycotting PA elections. Besancenot added that PM Sharon's public warning that he would prevent Hamas participation in January PA elections had been highly counter-productive, a view which he said was shared by other EU members.

3. (C) In a separate discussion with us, Cabinet Middle East advisor Guilhou echoed Besancenot's points and described the French approach on the issue of Hamas participation in Palestinian elections as similar to the GoF approach on Hizballah. In other words, the GoF views a gradual political integration as the key to eventual disarmament of violent terrorist groups, and wants to keep such groups inside rather than outside political processes.

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